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This paper examines relevant research in comparative sociology, social anthropology with primitive societies, the behavior of primates, the hormonal control of social behavior, and contemporary social psychology. The reciprocal influence of social and biological factors on human societies is discussed. Moreover, the effect of attitudes on social roles is considered crucial. Because modern societies that value egalitarianism appear to be moving toward greater equalization of sex roles, this phenomenon--although far from being achieved--could be studied in future research as a "convergence hypothesis." Sex roles are not universal, need not be permanent, and are affected by both biology and social custom in varying degrees among different groups. (Author/APG)

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Sex Roles: Their Relationship To Cultural And Biological Determinants

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Abstract

This paper examines relevant research on comparative sociology, social anthropology with primitive societies, the behaviour of primates, the hormonal control of social behaviour, and contemporary social psychology. The reciprocal influence of social and biological factors on human societies is discussed. Moreover, the effect of attitudes on social roles is considered crucial. Because modern societies that value egalitarianism appear to be moving toward greater equalization of sex roles, this phenomenon--although far from being achieved--could be studied in future research as a 'convergence hypothesis'. The author argues that sex roles are not universal, need not be permanent, and are affected by both biology and social custom in varying degrees among different groups.

Sex Roles: Their Relationship To
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Social Roles define the patterns of action that indicate a position being occupied as well as the status appropriate to it. In addition, actions that are performed by an individual validate occupancy of a role. A relatively minor part of the behaviour prescribed for each sex (e.g., the breast feeding of infants) is due to obvious physical differences. Whilst obviously there are biological factors to consider, a greater proportion of human behaviour is due to culturally associated learning.

Sex roles are usually acquired through cultural training by the age of three. Types of clothing and toys have a great influence on boys and girls in assuming their expected roles. Also, children identify with their parent of the same sex. Bandura and McDonald (1963), in a classic psychological study stressing social learning theory, stated that the process of modeling (imitation) is crucial. They also state that a child need only see a behaviour once in order to cause a possible imitation response.

To evaluate the degree of biological determinism inherently associated with human sex roles, it seems logical to examine a species of animals that has an extremely similar sex role differentiation to homosapiens. This species is the hamadryas baboon. They are ground living and form dominance groups. The most dominant male, the alpha

male, is the leader. Adult females have a midrange position on the dominance position continuum, less than the more dominant males but more so compared to the lesser dominant males. Reproduction and aggressiveness are closely tied together for this type of animal, because only the aggressive males have the opportunity to mate.

There is evidence that primates may inherit social status and conform to social roles over biological calling. In bands of free-ranging rhesus monkeys, adolescent males typically leave their mothers in the central part of the band and take on a low social rank at its periphery. The adolescent sons of mothers possessing high status, however, may remain in the center of the band and rise to high social rank without first becoming peripheral (Koford, 1963). The adult male hamadryas baboon with one to three permanent female consorts never attempts to mate with females in another male's 'harem' even though he is fully potent and quite capable of perceiving their sexually receptive condition (see Beach, 1977a, 1977b). Nevertheless, he copulates repeatedly with his own females when they are in estrus, suggesting that although testosterone secretion is quite adequate for normal sexual responsiveness, the activation of primary sexual behaviour is subject to nonhormonal social control.

With the primates, as in most species, males are more aggressive than the females, or are at least more willing to show it most of the time. Invariably, with most animals studied, the male hormone testosterone has been linked to aggressiveness (Glickman, 1973). When animals are deprived of this hormone, especially early in life, they tend to place low in adult dominance hierarchies. Moreover,

there 'is evidence that the male hormones have something to do with . . . readiness and ability to fight'; and, there 'is some evidence that different individuals secrete different proportions of adrenaline, and nonadrenaline, and that these chemicals have something to do with the individual's proneness to fight rather than flee' (Maslow, 1954, p. 128). Yet females--after having given birth, when their estrogen and progesterone hormonal levels are very high--often become quite aggressive if their young are threatened. Ergo, perhaps the amount of the sex hormone, rather than whether it is male or female, is the more important determinant of aggressiveness.

The thesis that sex differences in behaviour are largely due to culture appears in a most important anthropological study by Margaret Mead (1935). She compared three primitive tribes living relatively near each other and whose racial heritage was at least extremely similar if not the same. The three tribes studied lived in New Guinea, and were the Arapesh, the Tchambuli, and the Mundugumor. She found that both the men and women in the Arapesh culture behaved in ways that were responsive to the needs and concerns of others and avoided aggressiveness and competition. The Arapesh of both sexes conformed, in short, to behaviour patterns that would be considered 'feminine' to Western cultures. The behaviour of men and women alike in the cannibalistic Mundugumor society was characterized by hostility, aggressiveness, violence, and lack of consideration for the rights and feelings of others--qualities we would consider 'masculine'. It was in the Tchambuli culture, however, that Mead found a sex role reversal. The Tchambuli men were sensitive, carefully groomed, artistic, emotionally

volatile, and given to bickering; whereas the women were stable, practical, dominant, and aggressive in matters of sex. The Tchambuli females also shaved their heads--a pattern of behaviour not uncommon in certain cultures that strongly associate hair with masculinity. Mead's data greatly suggest that instinct is an insufficient basis for explaining sex differences in behaviour. Thus, what we recognize as sex-appropriate behaviour is the result of social learning rather than of biological inheritance.

Other interesting anthropological studies could be cited to make the same point. Among the native American Indians a comparison of the Hopi and Sioux tribes is instructive. Male competitiveness and aggressiveness are punished by the Hopi but rewarded by the Sioux. The 'machismo' of men in Mediterranean countries and some nations of Latin America might also be noted. There is a set of values and attitudes that lead men to project an ultramasculine image characterized by arrogance, lack of self-control, the sexual exploitation of women, and an enjoyment of violence.

Whereas Western societies expect men to be sexually aggressive and women to play a passive or evasive role, some African and American Indian societies maintain that women are more driven by sex than men (Albert, 1963). Among the American Zuni Indians, it is the groom, not the bride, who looks forward to the wedding night with fear and apprehension; and it is probably no coincidence that decisions in Zuni societies are made by women (Lindgren, 1973). Contradistinctively, emotional and intellectual sex roles in Iran are approximately the reverse of what would be expected in Western cultures (Hall, 1959).

Lindgren wrote that Iranian men are not expected to conform to the strong silent norm, but are expected to show their emotions and even have tantrums, for if they do not, other Iranians are likely to think that they lack vital human traits and are probably not dependable. Iranian men enjoy poetry and are supposed to be sensitive, intuitive, and not very logical--in Iran, it is the woman who is supposed to be logical and practical (Lindgren). It is worth reflecting, in view of these examples, that psychopathology and deviance are culturally defined.

It is applicable to include something about the attitudes of different societies concerning the acquisition of brides with relation to economic variables. In places where a 'bride price' is paid for wives, women serve as an important economic commodity, mainly because they perform much work and usually more than men. Contrasting this to nations where a 'dowery payment' is made to a future husband and/or his family, women generally do not perform much work of economic value. Finally, in cultures where there is a more egalitarian concept of the sexes, there is neither of the above two exchanges.

'We know of no culture that has said, articulately, that there is no difference between men and women except in the way they contribute to the creation of the next generation; that otherwise in all respects they are simply human beings with various gifts, no one of which can be exclusively assigned to either sex' (Mead, 1949, p. 8). Why have attempts at sex role equalization always failed if sex roles are only cultural and not biological? Two modern attempts to equalize them were seen in the Soviet Union and in the Kibbutz

setting of Israel. The reason for failure, in this writer's opinion, was that women dropped out of male roles because of an 'overload'. Women took both the male and female roles, but the men rarely took female roles. So there has never been a truly successful modern experience with the equalization of sex roles on a large scale. Interestingly, among young American adults, especially college students, negatively valued stereotypic feminine characteristics are rejected by women with respect to themselves and, conversely, men accept in themselves those stereotypically feminine characteristics that are positively valued (Rosenkrantz et al., 1968). Contemporary feminists are calling for an end to what they claim is 'sexploitation' of women by men.

Sex roles have an impact on all aspects of life, including education. The highest achievers of each gender are those whose behaviours and feelings are thought to correspond with the pattern that is conventionally expected for their sex (Wyer et al., 1965). Moreover, the tendency for sex-appropriate behaviour to be associated with academic achievement appears during the first years of school (Anastasiow, 1965).

The so-called 'new morality', brought about, in part, by sophisticated birth control products, has reduced greatly the fear of unwanted pregnancy and consequently has helped change cultural mores. It seems obvious that much of the world is moving farther away and at a faster pace from classical values than ever before. These sorts of changes have been a major impetus in the USA for the implementation of 'values clarification' programs and 'family life' (sex) education

in the public (government sponsored) schools (Sigmon, 1984).

When research in the complicated area of social (sex) roles is done in a nonsexist manner (see McHugh et al., 1986), many early notions are exposed for what they are, merely stereotypes. For instance, take the complex area of helping behaviour research. In general, females are not necessarily more likely in ordinary situations to offer help than males despite the stereotype that women are more concerned about nurturance (Bickman, 1974; Unger et al., 1974), nor do young American college women show a greater gain in self-esteem by volunteering for a campus (psychological) study (Sigmon, 1975). What does appear to be true, however, is a greater frequency of opposite-sex helping over same-sex helping in common situations (Bickman; Sigmon; Unger et al.).

Cultural bias is reflected by the attitudes of psychologists in their respective cultures. Psychologists of different nations give different reasons why marriages of dual career families--where both husband and wife work, usually as professionals--fail. In the USA women are blamed, but in Czechoslovakia the men are at fault for not being able to withstand their wives' competition (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1969).

In conclusion, a major source of the difference in the behaviour of the two sexes can be found in the expectations that society has for its members, and what they, as a result, have for themselves. Much research to date shows that males are more likely to become involved in behaviour characterized by risk, aggressiveness, and task orientation while females are more likely to prefer activities

involving social interaction and ingratiation. Although these differences seem to occur in most cultures (and in most animals of most primate species) they are not universal nor need to permanent. I should like to put forth the hypothesis that as any society which values egalitarianism becomes more modern, there will be a diffusion or, if you will, a convergence of gender roles. If this 'convergence hypothesis' is correct, the resultant effect would be more sharing of traditional sex roles with greater opportunities for both genders. Although this author does not believe complete equalization of sex roles is possible in the near future, many modern societies are, nevertheless, moving in that direction. As greater awareness of and a concern over the negative consequences of false gender stereotypes develop, we can hope to see much more progress not only within the area of careers but with all other aspects of human relationships. Researchers, therapists, and educators must not let sexism--which unfortunately abounds, in print, the spoken language, and actions--affect professionalism, and must actively seek to eliminate it.

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